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Lotti Vendig - Kallmann

(translated by my mother, Lotte Hirschland Carter)

* / The St. Louis
7 camps

Our Emigration and Its Consequences

Henry, Stephanie and David have asked so frequently where we had spent our life prior to our emigration to the United States of America. Fred then gave me the idea to write down, whatever has remained in my memory.

Papa and I were married in 1930. Even then the newspapers reported much about Hitler; antisemitic statements had become daily occurrences. Papa's father died suddenly due to an automobile accident; he was felled by a huge gasoline truck in the Marktstrasse of Kaiserslautern. After a short period, without regaining consciousness, Grandfather died. This happened the day before our civil wedding ceremony.

After the Jewish mourning period of four weeks had passed, we got married, wearing mourning attire; the rabbi gave us his blessings in his small study. After a small lunch at home, we travelled to Heidelberg, and stayed for four days. Papi was not able to allow more time for the honeymoon.

Now a time of reorganization began in our business; it consisted of a ready-to-wear men's and ladies' clothing store spread out over two large floors. We could not move into the apartment, which we had rented, because Oma (Grandma) insisted that we live with her. Her grief for her husband was so great that we did not dare contradict her. We established our living quarters on the fourth floor of the house, but it was unthinkable to consider running our own household. That was very hard for me, also disappointing.

Papa was so burdened with the responsibility of taking care of the business, that he had no ear for my disappointments; he also failed to observe the political situation sufficiently.

On December 31, 1932 Fred was born. That was a highlight in my rather dreary life. On January 30, 1933 Hitler came to power. In the spring of 1933, to be exact, it was in April, there was a big boycott of all Jewish stores. We had two entrances, one for the store, the other one for our own use, and in addition there were ten big display windows. The brown SA's were standing guard in front of both entrances and prevented customers from entering the store. In front of the display windows the metal shutters had to be pulled down and a threatening large crowd of people stood in front of the house for a period of three long weeks. After this anxious time former customers returned and business resumed somewhat. But the "propaganda of hate" by the news media against the Jews continued, and the SA and SS (Nazi troops) marched daily through the city. More and more swastika flags showed up, and the first of our friends, after returning from arrest and incarceration, started to pack their belongings in preparation for emigration.

I pleaded with Papa to do something for our emigration, but he and Oma did not want to hear of it. The year 1934 passed; business was not too bad. Civil service employees, however, were threatened with dismissal if they patronized Jewish stores.

In the summer of 1935 Fred suffered a severe tonsillitis. Our physician recommended that we take him for recuperation to Muenster am Stein, where he might be helped by inhalation of the saline vapors. Fred and I stayed in a beautiful hotel, and on Sunday Papa and Oma came to visit us by car; it was a Mercedes Benz. On the third weekend, Fred and I were sitting on the terrace when I saw our automobile driving up, but it was Oma alone with our driver. I knew something was wrong. Oma told me: "You have to come home immediately, Ernst is in jail." I packed our belongings, paid the hotel bill, and we drove home.

What had happened? Papa had had a chat with the owner of the neighboring store - a fabric store, just at the entrance door, when an acquaintance joined them. These three gentlemen were observed, of course, and accused of holding a political gathering. We still had a number of good friends, and I phoned around. A judge of the court assured me that he was going to see to it, that nothing untoward would happen to Papa. After three weeks of continued effort to get him released, Papa returned home, thank God, in good health. More and more people were emigrating. In 1936 we spent our last joint vacation in Germany. We went to Wuerzburg, Schweinfurt, Wertheim am Main, and Baden-Baden.

At most restaurant doors were signs saying "Jews not wanted". Our hearts were heavy; these were not carefree vacations anymore.

By the end of 1936 we had to sell our business, under duress by the Nazis, to the new owner Claussen, who to date of my writing, June 1976, still conducts the business.

We moved to Berlin, for my part, reluctantly. I would have preferred to emigrate. In Berlin Papa started once more to establish a clothing factory. We had a beautiful apartment at Innsbrucker Strasse 37. On July 24, 1937 our Henry was born. I was very, very ill for seven weeks after the delivery. My life was in the balance. Dr. R. Feilchenfeld took care of me and for weeks visited me daily. Thank God Henry thrived and I recuperated gradually. The newly established business did not do badly in the beginning, but had no long-term future, considering the political situation. After numerous losses, Papa had to liquidate the business in 1938.

Then came the 10th of November 1938. All over Germany synagogues were burned down. The Reichstagsgebaeude (House of Representatives) went up in flames. SA troops forced their way into Jewish homes and ransacked them. I was with Henry in the park and when I returned home, Papa was not there. He had been arrested and taken, where to, no one could say. Like a miracle, our apartment had been spared - at least that. Most of our friends in Berlin had already emigrated, including the Feilchenfelds. I hardly knew where to turn for assistance. Herr Claussen came from Kaiserslautern, because he had heard of the arrests. He went to the police headquarters in Berlin and brought back the message that Papa had been sent to the concentration camp Oranienburg. Then a gentleman by the name of Dr. Hugo Heim visited me; he was a former director of the Deutsche Bank, and a cousin of Uncle Jules Heim.

Dr. Heim had some connections, exactly where I am unable to say. Anyhow, following Dr. Heim's intervention, our dear Papa returned home after three weeks of detention. One morning he was there, with his head shaven and his hands bloody and bruised. His clothes were not wearable. Papa did not say much about his experiences in concentration camp Oranienburg; in any case it was so horrible that he wanted to forget about them. Detention in the concentration camp had made Papa ready for emigration.

During his absence and without his knowledge, I had already taken care of all formalities for emigration and obtained permission to get our furniture and household goods packed. So everything had been packed and shipped to the free-port of Hamburg. When Papa returned from the camp he found us in good health, but an almost empty apartment. During his absence I had contacted friends of ours who were already living in Paraguay, with the intention to emigrate there, because we had registered too late for immigration to the U.S.A. and we could not expect to be admitted any earlier than 1941. Since the American Consulate in Stuttgart adhered to the strict immigration quotas, we would have to find another place to spend the waiting period. At the Paraguayan consulate our visas were ready; then a new law was issued in Germany: people who still had a considerable amount of property had to pay additional taxes (special tax on Jews). Only after payment of this tax, were passports issued. This affected Oma. Only so to say after the last dime had been taken from us, could she obtain her passport. In the meantime our visas at the Paraguayan Consulate had expired.

In the spring of 1939 we heard of the possibility to get to Cuba. A gentleman by the name of Kurt Strauss of Kaiserslautern informed me about this. I was immediately ready to get the tickets for the journey. Papa did not agree to this at first, but we talked about it. I convinced him, that the trip to Cuba was our only chance to get out of Germany. At night in our bedroom we had a heated discussion, and I told him: "your father had 20,000 DM as emergency funds in Switzerland. We are in dire need right now. We should make use of this money. What is the use of saving this money and dying here?" Thereupon he gave me permission to book the passage to Cuba on the St. Louis. The rest of our belongings were packed and so we traveled to Hamburg on May 10, 1939. Our devoted housekeeper Maria accompanied us and it was she who carried Henry on her arms onto the ship. Then we had to say goodby to this loyal soul.

We had first class tickets: a cabin for Oma, myself and the children; Papa shared his cabin with another gentleman.

About the passage and the fate of the St. Louis, a book has been published which pretty accurately reports what happened on board this ship. The passage on this ship was pleasant. We had no idea that there were spies and Nazi agents on board. We were too naive. The ship stayed one week in the harbor of Havanna. All we could find out from the Cuban guards was "manana". Then the return trip was started, direction Europe. Panic broke out among the passengers. Seven weeks of uncertainty passed on the high seas, until we finally could dock in Antwerp where we were allowed to go on land. There is a little book by Captain Schroeder about this fateful journey, which he dedicated to us and sent to us in Brussels. I still have this little book and keep it well.

As we disembarked from the ship in Antwerp, a Jewish committee greeted us, and then we had to line up at a restaurant for our meals. People walked by and glanced at us; there was a man who patted Henry's head and gave him a bar of chocolate. This depressed and humiliated us so much, that Papa wrote a little story about it, which I have kept with my documents and memories. The refugees, that is what we were now, were lodged in a hotel. Expenses were covered by the American Joint Committee, since we had been allowed to emigrate with no more than 10 DM per adult.

In Brussels we received permission to search for an apartment, which we soon found. We rented it from the family Couvreur in the Rue des Aduatiques 69. From the Joint Committee we received a monthly subsidy, and were able to live on it only very modestly. That was in August 1939. We lived peacefully in that apartment for several weeks. Fred was able to attend school and adjusted easily to the French language. He spoke it fluently very soon and made friends in his class. We took daily walks with Henry in the Cinquantenaire Park in Brussels, which was close by.

In September 1939 Hitler declared war against Poland. We were greatly concerned. The winter passed quietly, but on May 10, 1940, the Germans invaded Belgium. Bombs fell upon Brussels. At 10:00 in the morning the Belgian police came to arrest Papa, because he was a former German. Actually, we had lost our German citizenship already in 1935. Passports and drivers' licenses had been taken away at that time so we were without any identification papers until we boarded the St. Louis; then we were given new passports which bore the letter J (to identify Jewish persons). So Papa was gone and as he was leaving he said to me, try and get to Northern France. I tried to find out where the arrested men had been sent, but I was unable to get any information. The wildest rumors were circulating, and after a few days I heard that a train with prisoners had been sent to Southern France. We waited several days for news, but since none came, I remembered the promise I had given to Papa when he was taken away and I packed a few things, in order to get to France. Our landlord, Mr. Couvreur implored me to stay, but we left nevertheless, since I thought to myself, that this good man did not know what the Nazis had in store for us.

With the greatest difficulty and braving enormous crowds we managed to get on a train to La Panne. On arrival there I looked for lodgings for us. We found a deserted villa where other refugees were already staying, and found a room for the four of us. How we obtained groceries, I can no longer recall. The people all had great fear of the advancing Germans. We experienced the heavy bombardment of Dunkirk and La Panne right there. It was like a miracle that we survived that gruesome night. It was impossible to travel further into France, and therefore we started our way back to Belgium, naturally on foot. On the way, I collapsed, had a fever and simply was unable to keep walking. We sat down by the side of the road and were picked up there by a French military patrol. Evidently we had strayed into French territory. A young French officer took us to an abandoned house where we spent the night in the basement. The officer brought us warm milk-coffee and bread. The next morning he loaded us into his car and brought us to the Belgian border, which we were allowed to cross thanks to his good word. I was so grateful to this young soldier and would have liked to let him know, but during wartime there were no names. In Belgium we moved along by horse-drawn vehicles. Whenever we found a ride, we took it. We passed towns and villages that had been horribly destroyed, one of those was Bruges, once a beautiful medieval town, now just a ruin. After days of travelling we arrived back again in Brussels. Of course I went back to the Rue des Aduatiques - where else could I have gone? Hesitantly I rang the doorbell of family Couvreur - the door opened and we were greeted like members of the family. It was an exciting reunion, and we were able to return to our apartment. Now a sad time began. I had no money. I registered with the welfare office and received just enough assistance to buy the most essential things. All groceries were scarce and rationed. No news from Papa. We didn't know anything of him, and he knew nothing about us. Rent I was unable to pay, and winter was at the door. One morning Mr. Couvreur came to see us, and I trembled, presuming that he would ask us to leave. But the opposite happened, he hugged me and told me not to worry, he had experienced similar things himself during the war of 1914-1918, we could stay for the duration of the war. Not only could we stay in the house of this wonderful family, they even helped us out with their unused food ration stamps. Fred attended school in Brussels and was a good student. I followed all rumors to find out something about Papa. Finally, months later there came a card forwarded by the Red Cross, saying that he was alive and in a camp at St. Cyprien near Perpignan. Then I tried to send him some news about us. There were truck drivers who took mail along to the camps, and also brought messages back. So a very sparing communication was set up. Papa sent us drawings and poems of homesickness from down there. Then we agreed, that we were going to try to get together. Belgium, in the meantime was under German occupation. A dutch couple - she was from Zuerich and knew Aunt Anni and Uncle Jules - gave us enough money to give to a smuggler to help us to get into unoccupied France.

The plans materialized, but the Couvreurs, those dear people, were greatly opposed to this renewed risk, but we took it anyhow. We left Brussels and the Rue des Aduatiques, which had become so dear to us, in May 1941. The first stop was in Dixmuiden, where we spent the night in a half destroyed house. The following morning we met with the guide for our flight, he brought us false papers, with the photographs which we had given to him the previous evening. Since we had to cross a temporarily constructed bridge over the Somme on foot, we needed the documents for identification. Oma's picture was in the passport of an 18 year old French girl! Even the most stupid German soldier would have spotted this falsification. So it came, that our guide had to run once more and procure another document. After this had been obtained, we passed the bridge and the check point without problems. Thank God, nothing happened. Then we travelled by train to Paris. There our guide brought us to a pitifully shabby hotel; the linen was indescribable, the toilet facilities quite outdated - a hole in the floor - something that I had never seen. The following day we travelled by train to Tours where another group of refugees joined us. In Tours accommodations were equally as poor as in Paris. Thank God, Oma and the children tolerated it all well. Henry, I held mostly by the hand or on my lap, and asked him not to talk. He was fascinated by the presence of the many soldiers everywhere, but they were Germans, our greatest enemies. Fred, who was nine years old, understood the dangerous situation and behaved like an adult. In Tours our guide found an old camion and loaded us on it. We travelled as far as the forest, which was the demarcation line. This we had to cross on foot. We had to negotiate the underbrush and I had to carry Henry, who was four years old. Oma carried our bags, which contained the most necessary items like pants for the children, and some cubes of sugar as iron rations for hunger. Fred, independent as he was, ran ahead of us with two single ladies, who had joined us. Suddenly, a shout from our guide, "the soldiers are coming, everyone get down".

The soldiers disappeared, and so did our guide, and before I could realize it, Fred had disappeared too. Where was he? I had to get my child back. We dragged ourselves towards a house, which turned out to be a farm. The woman let us into the barn. Suddenly, she came running and cried "the soldiers are coming". And at the same moment they knocked at the door of the barn. I opened the door in spite of the protest of my companions. I had to talk to them; I had to find my boy. When I opened the door three soldiers yelled "hands up", which we complied with, and nozzles of three guns were pointed at me. I took heart, and said that we were refugees and I had lost my child in the woods and asked permission to look for him. Then a soldier spoke up, saying "Madame, calm down, your son and two ladies are with us and he has sent us to you". Never have I had better news than this.

The soldiers took all of us to their camp. There was my Fred scooting merrily about. He had already eaten and was happy to see us again. For the time being, we had been saved; Fred acted as interpreter. In the evening we were taken before an officer, where Fred and I spoke for all of us. We could stay! The next day soldiers led us to Chassneuil in the Charente. There was a Jewish soldier amongst them, whom I asked to write to Aunt Annie about our successful escape. In Chassneuil we were lodged in an inn, the four of us in two beds. It was there, that Oma became very ill and had to stay in bed with a high fever and shingles of the face. She lay in her black dress which she had worn throughout the flight, because we did not have any change of clothing. In addition, she developed diarrhea and I had to run back and forth with a bucket, for there was no bathroom in the house.

At last I was able to contact Papa in Camp Les Milles and soon he came to us on leave. Henry did not recognize his Papa any more; more than a year had passed since we had seen each other. The reunion was a great pleasure for all of us, but unfortunately Papa had to return to camp after only a few days. From there he was able to obtain a travel permit for us, so that we were able to leave for Marseilles a few weeks later. Meanwhile there were several dramatic incidents in Chassneuil. A female refugee had stolen some gold from another refugee woman, who had smuggled it over the border in a skin cream jar. It had been her last reserve. The thief suddenly disappeared.

In Marseilles we were met by the dear Papa, and we went to Aix-en-Provence to look for housing. We found a little house, which was only a ten minute walk from the center of the city, in the Quartier Cotton Rouge. The house had been built by a laborer and it was not quite completed yet, but he let us rent it. An old stove, which had seen better days and was sitting in the owner's yard, was brought into the kitchen. Our entire furniture consisted of an old table, some old chairs, and three iron beds, which he had acquired somewhere. But this sufficed; we had not much to store anyway. We gathered firewood on the nearby collin and fired the stove with it, so we could prepare our food. Life was spent mostly outdoors, which was just fine for our children. I had to see to it that we were registered and granted food rationing cards, since all food was rationed. Slowly this too was worked out, and Papa was able to come and visit us once a week on leave. I had borrowed a bicycle from our dear farmer neighbors and rode on it to Les Milles. Whenever Papa was not able to obtain leave, I brought him some food. Groceries were very scarce; bread was of poor quality; nevertheless Oma and I tried to make something edible out of everything. This almost idyllic life was always overshadowed by worries about the future. It lasted from May 1941 to August 1942. Papa was visiting us on Sunday; he had been transferred in the meantime from Les Milles to Aubagne, to a work camp. He came from Aubagne now and told us that we had to prepare ourselves for a likely deportation to the East. Deportations from occupied France had already been going on for some time.

My poor brother Ernst, his wife Elizabeth and their two children, Franz who was about 13 years old and Eva, 5 years old, had already been deported from Frankfurt. Once when Papa visited us on a Sunday we looked for old clothes to make into backpacks. Papa travelled back to the camp in the evening. During the very same night I heard "our whistle". At first I thought it was a dream; then little pebbles were thrown at the window. So I looked out and saw Papa standing there in the middle of the night. His colonel had sent him back, since deportations were planned from camp for the following day. What to do now? At the break of dawn, we ran to the farm and asked the owners to hide Papa. The day passed in great anxiety. The following morning at 5 o'clock, August 4, 1942, there was a knock at our door. I opened and there was the police. "Pack your bags", they said. All our pleading did not help. I had to wake the children and Oma. I had just enough time to pack a few pieces of clothes for the children. Then we were loaded on a truck, and brought to Camp Les Milles. Papa who was still on the farm had heard of our arrest and followed us to Les Milles. He gave himself up voluntarily, so that he could be with us.

There was great turmoil in Les Milles when we arrived. Men and women were being separated. Food was brought in big buckets and had a horrible smell. I was not able to eat a thing. That was on August 5, 1942. The children were with Papa during mealtime. I went down to the yard - the sun was burning hot - and sat down on a pile of wood. For several minutes I sat there, my head on my arms, when someone tapped me on my shoulder and asked in French, "what are you doing there?" Right away I recognized the camp commander and told him I was unhappy because we would be sent to the East. I asked him, could he not save us? At that moment, Ernst and the children came across the yard toward us. The commander inquired about the ages of our children and I told him, that Henry had just turned 5 years on July 24. At that time there was still a rule that families with children under the age of five were excluded from deportation. The commander's response was that I should see him at his office at 3 o'clock in the afternoon. I told Papa that I did not want to go alone, so he went with me. The commander asked us several questions about our origin and past, why we were in France, and once more about our children's ages. I answered all questions honestly, and correctly. He rang for his deputy and requested that our records be brought in - I had no idea that a file on us existed. The commander checked all the information I had given him, got up from his chair, came toward me, took my hand and said: "Madame, you do not have to go."

We escaped four deportations in Les Milles. These were gruesome days and nights. Everyone was crying. There were parting from many people whom, in the brief time, we had come to know and appreciate. The rabbi from Marseilles came once to pray with us and said "God will be with you."

The nights were unbelievable; we lay on iron cots and were virtually consumed by the bed bugs. I sat at the children's beds to pick the bugs off their necks, ears and their entire body. At this point I must add, that a commission came to the camp and promised to send all the children to the U.S.A. According to them, a steamer was anchored in the harbor of Marseilles ready to take on the children. Papa and I decided not to separate ourselves from the children. Much later we learned that all of those children had been deported to the infamous extermination camps and perished there.

Then came the day that we were deported by cattle trucks to Rivesaltes concentration camp near Perpignan. From there trains left for Auschwitz. Papa met the guard from Les Milles and reminded him that we had been exempted from deportation to the East. We survived a roll call to the transport. Back again in the barracks, I was called. I feared the worst, but instead a lady stood before me dressed in light blue, wearing the Red Cross emblem on her sleeve, and said to me: "Annie has sent me here, I am to bring you to Zuerich". Ernst advised her to go to the camp office and to present proof there, that we were expected in Switzerland. This courageous lady spoke French fluently, was able to achieve our release and receive the necessary papers for us. All five of us could leave the camp. In response to our pleading, we were able to take a friend of Papa's from camp, and a lady friend of mine with us, so that two more people were saved. The camp administration made a car available to bring us to Perpignan. We travelled to Aix by train. In Aix we found only a few items of our belongings; the neighbors had helped themselves to everything. We went to the farm and the family Dedominici greeted us the way one greets dear relatives. We had a meal with them and looked for lodging in a hotel in Aix.

Now we waited anxiously for the lady in blue, a Mrs. Charlotte Leuenberger from Zuerich, who had to save a few more refugees and only returned several days later. She organized the trip from Aix to Evian. On the train our papers were checked. Our hearts were pounding but this, too, passed. In Evian we were met by a guide who led us over the mountains into Switzerland. On September 14, 1942 we reached free Switzerland. At first we were turned over to the border police - we were allowed to stay. The children, Oma and the guaranty of our family in Zuerich were our salvation, because, unfortunately, some people did not make it; they were turned back. We were totally exhausted from the experiences and the strain of the flight. We stayed overnight in Bouvray and slept on straw. Then, a few days later we got to Bex to a refugee camp. From then on we could breathe freely - we had reached safety.

June 10th, 1980

Charlotte-Lotti
Kallmann-Vendig